DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 370 148 CS 508 576

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TITLE Discovering Hidden Voices.
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 5p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)
JOURNAL CIT Bread Loaf News; v4 n3 p24-25 Fall-Win 1991

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Class Activities; Classroom Environment; *Creative Dramatics; *Drama; *Improvisation; Instructional Innovation; Secondary Education; Self Expression; Student Needs; *Student Reaction
IDENTIFIERS *Drama in Education

ABSTRACT

Working with teachers and artists from Florida to Maine, a drama educator has discovered that creative power and insight can emerge when using drama in the language arts classroom. One seventh-grade class began with simple warm-ups to loosen inhibitions and then moved into a unit that dealt with improvising using movement. A student who had hardly spoken in class led discussions. A student in a tenth-grade class (who was too "cool" to participate) described a female character in an abstract painting by Picasso, probing deeply into the character. Because creative drama relies on group collaboration as the key to solving activities, all students have the opportunity to star in important roles. Students should be grouped into performance ensembles. Such ensembles can then develop improvisations, discuss, and write about a "statue" consisting of several students standing in the middle of the class who then "freeze" into a group statue. Resources, artist residencies, workshops, and grants for specific projects are available to the classroom teacher to introduce drama into the curriculum. Students may learn (as one young man in a correctional facility did) to trust others and to realize that others could be leaders too. (Contains a list of 18 drama resources.) (RS)

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DISCOVERING HIDDEN VOICES

Carol Collins

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Discovering hidden voices

by Carol Collins

I remember one day walking across campus—still uncertain about my major, my future—and ending up at the theatre, I saw a film that shocked me into a new awareness. On the screen, a remarkable British dramatist was creating exciting improvisations with a classroom of elementary students. This was school? This was drama? Transfixed and strangely alert, I watched Dorothy Heathcote offer me discovery and meaning for my future. Drama, which was helping me to overcome my shyness, which was giving me new confidence, could be used as an inventive tool for the classroom.

I changed my major to drama, began directing a touring children's troupe, started a puppetry theatre, began devising drama activities for school curricula, and never looked back.

In the seventeen years since that life-changing moment, I have been working with teachers and artists from Florida to Maine. I've discovered that every student possesses a remarkable creative reservoir. Unexpected results always surface using drama activities in the classroom. Some of the most belligerent, repressed, or unmotivated students exhibit powerful leadership and teamwork skills. Their stories reveal the creative power and insight which can emerge when using drama in the language arts classroom.

In one seventh grade class, we began our explorations with simple warm-ups to loosen inhibitions because I planned to go into a unit that dealt with improvising using movement. For students not used to drama in the classroom, nonverbal exercise makes it easier to relate to each other. And movement opens the students up to a certain kind of communication and collaboration that they can't discover in their seats. The class was divided into improvisational groups. After collaborating in separate corners, each group shared their explorations with the class "audience." One student group was given a ten-foot length of yellow paper. The objective: Use movement with the paper to communicate a sequence of events under a central theme. The only rule: Use no words. (It's best to begin with nonverbal activities so that students feel less threatened.) One student in the group acted as nonverbal "narrator" by being the paper manipulator. The others in the group were moving characters reacting to his manipulations. As the narrator pinched, scrunched, weaved, spiraled, tore and finally waved the yellow paper in two pieces, the movement characters enacted a story of a caterpillar, struggling to weave a cocoon and finally emerging as a butterfly. The class responded with shouts of appreciation. Through improvisation they had discovered things about themselves, about setting and sequencing that couldn't have been discovered in other ways.

In the discussion that followed, one audience member carefully detailed the color and beauty of the butterfly. This prompted others to elaborate on the setting of the story. Afterward, the teacher pulled me aside and said, "I can't believe Jennifer led that discussion! She hasn't said three words all year." In the following workshops with that class, Jennifer became animated with our explorations. She had discovered a new voice.

In a tenth grade class, I asked the students to describe the female character in an abstract painting by Picasso. We were working on adding detail and substance to our story characters. The class first offered expected replies, describing her dress, mood, possible living conditions. Just when I was about to explain the difference between internal and external characteristics and motivations to probe more deeply into the painting's character, one student suggested, "She thinks and acts more with her head than with her heart." I was stunned. This insight had come from Jeff, who was usually too "cool" to participate. "Wow," I said. Jeff saw that all heads were turned his way. He liked that; it was a feeling he rarely encountered in the classroom. When I asked him to elaborate on his vision, he said, "Well, her head is in a square, separated from the rest of her body. The rest of her body is hazy, flowing, not real defined. She'd like to get in touch with her heart, but her head gets in the way."

The class then created improvisations, adding substance and meaning to the Picasso character. Jeff had led the way. In the process, he gained a new perspective about the classroom and about his relationship to his peers.

Because creative drama relies on group collaboration as the key to solving activities, all students have the opportunity to star in important roles—as authors, directors, team builders, problem solvers, vision seekers. This collaboration promotes an understanding that we all have different ideas, perspectives, and ways of seeing. Students learn to value their own distinct voices and to value the unique voices around them.

I have found that it's been effective to group students into performance ensembles,

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complete with actors, director, and playwright. I frequently use an activity called Statues to begin this writing process. Several students standing in the middle of a class circle "freeze" into a group statue. The onlookers identify the characters, the setting, the major focus and the present actions suggested by this frozen moment. Depending upon where the observers stand in the outer circle, the major focus can vary, leading to a good discussion of points of view.

Working in separate performance ensembles, students then prepare an improvisation from the statue of present action (What's happening now?), prior action (What happened before this freeze moment?), and future action (What will happen next?). After sharing their improvisations, the class has seen many different versions inspired from the same scene. Discussion becomes quite animated about the possibilities and alternatives to the writing process. Students then begin to write their individual versions of the scenario, adding detail and using discussion suggestions to assist revisions.

By incorporating movement and dialogue, students are offered a lively introduction to the elements of writing. They begin to *visualize* which elements in their stories need attention. *Vision* consequently becomes the author's guiding companion. The students also become important collaborators, relying on teamwork, positive criticism, and negotiation to analyze and complete the improvisations. This process promotes self-esteem, strengthens critical thinking and leadership skills, motivates classroom participation, and cultivates a spirit of self-expression and risk-taking. Most importantly, it allows the freedom for discovery and re-covery of our individual voices; the creator inside each of us is challenged to emerge.

Many resources are available to the classroom teacher to introduce drama into the curriculum. Some of my favorites are listed at the end. Also many states offer artist residencies to schools with partial funding through the state arts council. Teachers can contact their state arts agencies and ask for the Arts in Education artist roster and funding information for residencies and artists workshops. A requested planning session is highly recommended when scheduling artists for the classroom. It is important that the artist become a partner with the teacher, understanding the goals, classroom needs, and curriculum focus.

Additional grants for special projects may also be available through local and state arts agencies, the state humanities council, and the state department of education. Some states, like South Carolina's Arts in Basic Curriculum Plan, are receiving funding from the National Endowment for the Arts to make the arts a substantive part of the curriculum. Collaboration with your school's arts specialists may fit into your state's Arts in Schools Basic Education Grant (AISBEG) from NEA. Your state department of education and state arts agency can give you information on any possible AISBEG plans, on schools developing special projects, and on other private or nonprofit arts agencies that specialize in workshops for the classroom. Contact your state department's arts consultants who can give loads of help. And don't forget to seek out your school's drama specialist, if there is one. Many schools have developed exciting curriculum units with partnerships between the classroom teacher and arts specialist.

Among the hundreds of cherished workshop stories, one testimony really keeps me going. As Director of Creative Arts in Education at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center a couple of years ago, I asked two special dramatists to work at a resident correctional facility in Connecticut. Sue and Barbara were concerned about one young man who remained evasive and belligerent. He was tough, a leader among his peers. After not participating for several days, he finally joined the drama activities when he saw the fun others were having. At the end of the drama residency, we asked the group to write about what they had experienced. His unanticipated response left us speechless. He wrote, "I learned to trust other people I don't usually hang out with. I learned that others could be leaders, too."❑

Carol Collins is Project Coordinator for the South Carolina Arts in Basic Curriculum Plan at Winthrop College's School of Visual and Performing Arts. She is working on a drama resource booklet with companion video packets for classroom teachers and a musical-journal presentation entitled, "Into the Heartland."

Creative drama resources

by Carol Collins

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